

You Did Not Choose Your God

How Military Outcomes Determine What People Believe

On the material origins of religious conviction

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I. The Question Nobody Asks

Draw a line across a map of sixteenth-century Europe. North of it, people were Protestant. South of it, people were Catholic. They prayed differently, read different scripture, organized their churches differently, and periodically killed each other over these differences with a ferocity that suggests the stakes felt ultimate. The line was real. The convictions were sincere. The blood was real.

The line was also, nearly everywhere you checked it, a political border.

It followed — with small deviations explicable by local power struggles — the boundaries of the territories whose rulers had chosen one confession or the other, usually for reasons that had more to do with property, inheritance, alliance, and the extraction of church wealth than with theological conviction. The Peace of Augsburg in 1555 formalized what was already obvious on the ground: *cuius regio, eius religio*. Whose realm, his religion. The prince's choice was the people's faith.

No contemporary Protestant in a Lutheran territory and no contemporary Catholic in a Spanish Habsburg territory experienced this as an imposition. Both experienced their faith as genuine, personal, and spiritually meaningful. Both would have been outraged at the suggestion that their deepest convictions had been determined by the accident of which army had won which battle two generations earlier. The Protestant in Saxony was not wrong that his faith was genuine. He was wrong about where it came from.

This is the question nobody asks about religion, or about any belief system that functions the way religion does: not whether your convictions are sincere — they almost certainly are — but how you came to have them in the first place. The answer, examined

historically and cross-culturally without favoritism toward any particular tradition, is remarkably consistent. You have the beliefs of the people who won the last relevant war. You have them because those victors built institutions that transmitted those beliefs to you before you were old enough to evaluate them. And you experience them as freely chosen because institutional saturation, operating over a childhood, feels exactly like personal conviction.

This paper is about that mechanism. It is not an argument that religious experience is false or that spiritual life is meaningless. It is an argument that the specific content of what you believe — the particular god, the particular revelation, the particular set of rituals and prohibitions — is determined far less by your own reflection and far more by material and military history than most people are comfortable acknowledging.



II. The Mechanism

Start with the simplest version of the story. An army wins a decisive battle. The winning side controls territory. Controlling territory means controlling the institutions through which territory is administered: the courts that settle disputes, the schools that educate children, the tax collectors who extract resources, the ceremonies that mark births, marriages, and deaths, the calendar that organizes the year, the specialists — priests, judges, scribes — who interpret the rules by which life is lived.

Every one of these institutions can carry a belief system. In most of human history, they have. The court that settles your land dispute invokes divine law. The school that teaches your children to read uses sacred texts. The ceremony that marks your daughter's marriage requires priestly participation and signals membership in a community defined by shared belief. The calendar that tells you when to plant and when to rest is organized around religious festivals. The tax collector who comes to your door is legitimated by a theology that places the ruler in a divine chain of authority.

You do not choose to participate in these institutions. You were born into them. Your parents were born into them. The priest who baptized you or blessed your circumcision or read the prayers at your wedding was not offering you a theological option — he was performing a function that the entire community expected, that your family expected, that you expected, because it was what had always been done. The question of whether

you believed was not meaningfully separable from the question of whether you participated, and you participated because the alternative — refusing — would have meant exclusion from community, from legal protection, from the networks of mutual obligation that made ordinary life possible.

This is what institutional saturation means. It does not require a policeman at every door. It does not require constant coercion. It operates through the quiet omnipresence of a single framework for understanding reality — a framework so pervasive that alternatives become not just unlikely but literally difficult to think, because the concepts required to think them are not part of the vocabulary you have been given.

The child who grows up in a Sunni Muslim household in ninth-century Baghdad does not encounter Islam as one option among several. Islam is the structure of time (the five daily prayers organize the day), the structure of the year (Ramadan, the Hajj), the structure of law (sharia governs commercial disputes, family relations, inheritance), the structure of community (the Friday mosque is where political and social life converges), the structure of meaning (death and resurrection, divine justice, the promise of paradise). To reject Islam would not be to choose a different set of propositions about God. It would be to reject the entire framework within which life made sense. Almost nobody does that. Almost nobody can.

Now ask: where did this framework come from? The Abbasid caliphate that organized ninth-century Baghdad came to power through military revolution in 750 CE. The religious infrastructure of that caliphate — the mosque system, the schools, the legal scholars, the official interpretation of revelation — was built and maintained by a state that had military control of the territory. That military control was won on specific battlefields at specific dates, and had those battles gone the other way, the child growing up in Baghdad in 850 CE would have been absorbing a different framework entirely, and would have experienced that framework with equal conviction and equal sincerity.



III. Why Alternatives Disappear

The mechanism described above is powerful, but it has a vulnerability. If institutional saturation is the primary vehicle for transmitting belief, then the presence of alternative institutions — alternative schools, alternative ceremonies, alternative specialists offering

alternative frameworks — is a genuine threat. People who can see an alternative can compare. People who can compare can choose. And if they can choose, the automatic transmission of the dominant belief system is no longer automatic.

Every successful ruling elite in history has understood this, usually without articulating it in these terms. The response has been consistent across civilizations, religions, and centuries: suppress the alternatives. Not always through immediate violence — that is expensive and generates martyrs, who are bad for the project — but through a graduated sequence that moves from marginalization to criminalization to erasure.

The first stage is marginalization. The alternative belief system is denied access to official institutions. Its practitioners cannot hold government positions. Its schools receive no state funding. Its ceremonies have no legal standing — marriages performed by its clergy are not recognized, deaths recorded by its priests carry no legal weight. The alternative community can still exist, still worship, still transmit its beliefs internally. But it is structurally disadvantaged at every point of contact with official life. Over a generation or two, the material cost of maintaining the alternative rises while the material benefit of conforming to the dominant framework rises correspondingly.

The second stage is criminalization. The alternative belief is declared not merely heterodox but dangerous — a threat to the divine order, to public morality, to the stability of the state. This reclassification is important because it changes the category of the alternative believer from dissenter to criminal, from someone who is wrong to someone who is actively harmful. It licenses a different quality of response: not argumentation but enforcement. The Zoroastrian high priest Kartir, in third-century Persia, moved against the Manichaean movement after its royal patron died by precisely this path — framing Mani not as a theological competitor but as a corrupter of the divine order, which justified his imprisonment and death.

The third stage is erasure. This is the most important and least understood part of the sequence. Physical destruction of the alternative community — executions, exiles, dispersal — removes the people who carry the alternative memory. But physical destruction alone is insufficient, because texts, traditions, and the memory of what once existed can survive in fragments, in exile communities, in the sympathies of the population who watched the persecution. The complete project requires the destruction not just of the community but of the conceptual position — the erasure of the alternative from the space of thinkable options.

The Abbasid caliphate's persecution of the Manichaeans in the eighth and ninth centuries illustrates the full sequence with unusual documentary clarity. The Manichaeans had been the most internationally distributed religion of late antiquity. They had sophisticated theology, a written canon, a hierarchical church, and — critically — they occupied the same theological position Islam claimed for itself: the final and universal revelation, the Seal of the Prophets, the completion of all prior religious truth. Mani had made this claim four centuries before Muhammad. The claim was well documented and well known.

The early Abbasid state tolerated Manichaean presence because it needed the Persian administrative class that sustained the empire, and that class was substantially Manichaean in sympathy. Once the empire was sufficiently consolidated to absorb the loss, the Caliph al-Mahdi created a formal inquisition apparatus — the *Diwan al-Zanadiqa*, the Bureau of Heretics — whose specific purpose was to identify and execute Manichaeans who had converted to Islam but retained their prior beliefs. The trials used ingenious tests calibrated to Manichaean doctrine: suspects were ordered to spit on an image of Mani, to kill a small animal, to eat foods Manichaean practice forbade. A committed Manichaean could not perform these acts without violating his own deepest convictions. The test was designed to make concealment impossible.

Alongside the executions ran an intellectual campaign: the composition of *Radd ala al-Zanadiqa*, Refutation of the Heretics — official Muslim scholarship specifically designed to demolish the Manichaean theological position. These texts had to quote the Manichaeans in order to argue against them, which means they accidentally preserved the very arguments they were meant to destroy. We know what the Manichaeans were arguing in the ninth century because their prosecutors recorded it. But the purpose of the refutation literature was not merely to win the argument — it was to reclassify Mani entirely, to move him from the category of false prophet (which would require acknowledging he was in the same category as the true prophets) into the category of deliberate deceiver, a fraud who had never had genuine access to revelation. Once that reclassification succeeded, the comparison that would have been most damaging — that Muhammad and Mani had made structurally identical claims — could not even be formulated. There was no prior claimant because the prior claimant had been removed from the relevant category.

By the tenth century, the Manichaean center of gravity had moved from Baghdad to Samarkand, driven out of the Arab heartland by a century of sustained persecution. In the territories where the Abbasid inquisition had operated, Manichaeism was not merely defeated. It was unthinkable. Children growing up in those territories in 950 CE did not encounter it as a live option, did not know its arguments, did not know its history. The erasure was complete enough that even its completion was invisible — it did not feel like something had been removed, because the removal had been total.



IV. The Sincerity Problem

Here is where most people's intuitions resist the argument. Surely, the objection goes, the priests and soldiers who enforced these systems knew what they were doing. Surely the Abbasid inquisitors understood that they were serving political interests dressed in theological clothing. Surely the common soldier who enforced compliance with the new faith knew, at some level, that it was enforcement rather than persuasion. Surely someone in the system saw through it.

The historical record gives almost no support to this intuition. The evidence, across every well-documented case, points in the opposite direction. The people who built and maintained belief systems were, with rare exceptions, sincere believers themselves. The Abbasid inquisitors who hunted Manichaeans were not cynical operators performing a political function they privately recognized as fraud. They believed, with genuine conviction, that they were defending divine truth from a dangerous corruption. The soldiers who enforced religious conformity in sixteenth-century Europe were not secret skeptics executing orders they privately found absurd. They were faithful members of their communities doing what faithful members of their communities were supposed to do — protecting the sacred order from those who threatened it.

This is not a paradox. It is precisely what the mechanism predicts. The people doing the enforcing were themselves products of the same institutional saturation as everyone else. They had absorbed the dominant belief system in childhood, before critical evaluation was possible, through the same pervasive institutional channels — the schools, the ceremonies, the legal structures, the community expectations — that transmitted it to everyone else. Their conviction was as genuine as anyone's. More,

perhaps, because the act of enforcement required a quality of certainty that only genuine belief could supply. A cynical operator enforcing beliefs he privately disbelieves is a precarious figure, vulnerable to doubt, susceptible to the arguments of those he persecutes. A true believer enforcing beliefs he holds with total sincerity is armored against those arguments by the conviction itself.

The common soldier in the Abbasid inquisition who dragged a suspected Manichaean before the inquisitor was almost certainly not thinking: I am performing a political function that serves the interests of the ruling class. He was thinking: I am protecting the faith from those who would corrupt it. Those two descriptions are both accurate accounts of what he was doing. They feel mutually exclusive, but they are not. The mechanism works precisely because it produces genuine conviction in the people who carry it out. If it merely produced cynical compliance, it would be far less stable, far more expensive to maintain, and far more vulnerable to collapse.

This is the deepest point in the argument, and it is also the most uncomfortable. The sincerity of belief is not evidence against its manufactured origins. On the contrary: the manufacturing process, when it works well, produces exactly the kind of sincere, unquestioned, experientially vivid conviction that the believer will describe as freely chosen and personally meaningful. The Persian peasant who absorbed Zoroastrian cosmology through childhood rituals and agricultural festivals and the stories his grandmother told and the fire temple at the center of his village was not being deceived in any simple sense. His experience of that cosmology was real. His sense of its truth was real. The fact that it was transmitted to him by institutions built by a state that found the cosmology useful does not make his experience less real. It just means his experience is not the explanation of why he had that particular cosmology rather than another one.

The question is never whether the belief is sincerely held. It almost always is. The question is how it came to be held — and that question leads, reliably, away from individual spiritual discernment and toward the institutional infrastructure of whoever last won a war.

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V. Three Cases

Persia: Four Centuries, Three Faiths

The Persian plateau between 200 CE and 850 CE is perhaps the cleanest natural experiment available for testing the argument. The land, the climate, and the genetic composition of the population were essentially constant across this period. What changed, dramatically and three times, was which military power controlled the institutional infrastructure.

Under the Sasanian Empire (224–651 CE), Zoroastrianism was the state religion. The Zoroastrian priesthood — the Magi — ran the fire temples that organized village religious life, provided the clergy who legitimated the king's divine mandate, trained the judges who applied sacred law, and transmitted the Avesta through educational institutions that the state funded. Persian children grew up Zoroastrian because every institution that touched their lives was Zoroastrian. The idea that they might have been otherwise is retrospective — at the time, Zoroastrianism was simply the structure of reality.

When the Sasanian emperor Shapur I patronized Mani in the third century, Manichaean communities spread rapidly through the empire precisely because they had royal access to the institutional apparatus. When Shapur died and the Zoroastrian high priest Kartir maneuvered his successors into withdrawing that patronage and then executing Mani, the Manichaean expansion stalled. Without institutional infrastructure, without the schools and legal standing and official ceremonies that make a belief system the default option, Manichaeism remained a minority movement sustained by its own internal organization — impressive, but unable to compete with a state-backed rival.

Then the Arab armies arrived. The Sasanian Empire collapsed between 636 and 651 CE, one of the most dramatic military collapses in recorded history. The new rulers were Muslim. Over the following two centuries, the institutional apparatus of the Persian plateau was systematically reoriented. The fire temples were converted or fell into disuse as state maintenance ended. The Zoroastrian legal system was replaced by Islamic law. Arabic became the language of administration and scholarship. The schools that educated Persian children taught Quran rather than Avesta. The ceremonies that organized life — birth, marriage, death, the turning of the year — moved through Islamic rather than Zoroastrian frameworks. By 850 CE, Persia was Muslim. Not because Persians had evaluated the theological merits of Islam and found them superior to Zoroastrianism. Because the institutions that transmitted belief had changed hands, and

institutional change, operating over two or three generations, changes what people believe.

The Zoroastrians who survived — the Parsis, who fled to India rather than convert — preserved their faith precisely by maintaining their own institutional infrastructure in exile: their own fire temples, their own priests, their own community schools, their own marriage ceremonies. Isolated from the dominant institutional apparatus of the conquered territory, they could transmit their belief across centuries. The mechanism works in both directions: institutional control transmits the dominant belief; institutional independence, where it can be maintained, transmits the alternative.

England: The Reformation as Administrative Reorganization

The English Reformation is usually taught as a story about Henry VIII's matrimonial difficulties, the corruption of the Catholic Church, and the spread of Protestant theological ideas through the work of Tyndale, Cranmer, and others. All of this is true. What is less often emphasized is the mechanism by which a population that was overwhelmingly and sincerely Catholic in 1530 became overwhelmingly and sincerely Protestant by 1600.

It was not persuasion. Protestant ideas had been available in England for decades before Henry's break with Rome. Lollardy had circulated vernacular scripture and anti-clerical theology since the fourteenth century. Tyndale's Bible was being smuggled into England in the 1520s. None of this had produced a Protestant majority. The Catholic institutional infrastructure — the parish system, the monasteries, the feast days, the rituals of birth and death and marriage, the schools, the legal jurisdiction of church courts — was too pervasive to be dislodged by argument alone.

What dislodged it was a sequence of institutional interventions executed by the Tudor state. Henry's Act of Supremacy in 1534 transferred institutional control of the English church from Rome to the Crown. The Dissolution of the Monasteries between 1536 and 1541 physically destroyed the largest nodes of Catholic institutional infrastructure — not just the buildings but the schools, the hospitals, the communal rhythms organized around monastic life — while redistributing their wealth to a new class of Protestant-aligned gentry who now had material reasons to defend the settlement. Edward VI's government installed Protestant clergy in parishes and replaced the Latin

Mass with an English prayer book. Elizabeth I's settlement of 1559 made Protestant conformity legally mandatory.

Each of these steps was an institutional intervention, not a theological argument. And they worked — not immediately, not without resistance, but over two or three generations, as the children who grew up with the new prayer book and the new parish clergy and the new calendar of feast days absorbed Protestant Christianity as simply the structure of English religious life. By 1600, English Protestantism was experienced by most English people not as an imposition but as the natural and obvious form of Christian faith. The Catholics who maintained their practice — the recusants — were a stigmatized minority, precisely because they had refused the institutional saturation that had converted everyone else.

What England demonstrates, alongside Persia, is that the speed of the transition depends on the thoroughness of the institutional intervention. Where the state moved aggressively to replace the entire apparatus — as the Tudors did, as the Arab conquerors eventually did — the belief transition followed within two or three generations. Where the state allowed the old institutions to survive alongside the new — as the early Abbasids allowed Zoroastrian communities to persist under dhimmi arrangements — the old beliefs persisted correspondingly, sustained by the infrastructure that the state had not bothered to destroy.

Secular Nationalism: The Mechanism Without God

The most important modern confirmation of the argument is also the one that should be most surprising: secular nationalism. If the mechanism described here is really about religion, it should not apply to belief systems that explicitly reject the supernatural. But it does, which is evidence that the mechanism is not about religion at all. It is about belief systems that legitimate power — and secular nationalism does that as effectively as any theology.

The France that emerged from the Revolution was committed to replacing Catholic identity with Republican identity. The project was executed through the same institutional apparatus: schools (now teaching republican civic virtue and French national history instead of Catholic catechism), ceremonies (Bastille Day, civic holidays, the ceremonial trappings of the Republic), law (now derived from popular sovereignty rather than divine mandate), and the suppression of alternatives (the dechristianization

campaigns, the subordination of the church to the state, the replacement of the religious calendar with the revolutionary one). The institutional apparatus was the same. The content had changed.

French children educated in the republican school system of the late nineteenth century — the system Jules Ferry built, with its secular teachers replacing priests, its civic curriculum replacing scripture — absorbed French republican identity with exactly the same unreflective conviction that their grandparents had absorbed Catholicism. They did not experience this as indoctrination. They experienced it as education, as the transmission of obvious truths about what France was and what it meant to be French. The mechanism had produced a new belief system, and the new belief system felt exactly like the old one from the inside: natural, obvious, freely held, and worth defending.

The Soviet Union provides an even starker example. Marxism-Leninism had its saints (Marx, Lenin, later Stalin), its sacred texts (the collected works, the party program), its interpretive class (the party ideologists and censors who determined what the texts meant), its rituals (May Day parades, party meetings, the ceremonies of socialist life), its heresy trials (show trials that bore a structural resemblance to inquisitions that would have been familiar to the Abbasid officials who hunted Manichaeans), and its mechanisms for suppressing alternatives (the gulag, censorship, the systematic destruction of pre-revolutionary institutional infrastructure including the Orthodox Church). Soviet citizens who had grown up entirely within this system — the generation born after the revolution — absorbed Marxism-Leninism with a conviction that Western observers often found baffling. It was not performance. It was the product of institutional saturation operating on people who had never been given the tools to see it as anything other than obvious truth.



VI. What This Does and Does Not Mean

The argument made here is often misread as nihilism — as the claim that all belief is false, that religion is simply a tool of oppression, that spiritual experience is a delusion manufactured for political purposes. This misreading is worth addressing directly, because the argument is both more limited and more interesting than that.

It is more limited because it makes no claim about the truth or falsity of any particular belief system. Whether God exists, whether the Quran is divine revelation, whether the resurrection happened, whether the Dharma is the correct description of reality — these are questions this argument does not touch. What it addresses is the mechanism by which particular beliefs come to be held by particular people in particular places. That mechanism, historically, runs through military and material conditions and institutional transmission rather than through individual discernment. This is compatible with any belief being true. It is simply an account of how people come to hold it that differs from the account most believers give of themselves.

It is more interesting because it changes what questions are worth asking. If you understand the mechanism, you can ask historical questions that are otherwise invisible. Why did Christianity become the Roman state religion in the fourth century rather than Mithraism, which had been equally widespread among Roman soldiers? Because Constantine won a civil war and then spent the rest of his reign systematically installing Christian institutional infrastructure while defunding the alternatives — not because Christianity was more spiritually compelling in 325 CE than it had been in 300 CE. Why did Islam spread so much more rapidly through conquest than Christianity had through missionary activity alone? Because the Arab armies that carried Islam also carried the institutional apparatus of a new state, replacing existing structures immediately rather than competing alongside them for generations. Why did Protestantism survive in northern Europe but fail in southern Europe despite emerging from the same intellectual ferment? Because the territorial princes who controlled institutional infrastructure in the north adopted it while the Spanish and Italian states, whose institutional apparatus remained in Catholic hands, suppressed it.

These are not questions about which religion is more spiritually compelling or theologically coherent. They are questions about institutional control, military outcomes, and the material incentives that shape individual behavior in conditions where the state has determined what the dominant framework will be. Asking these questions does not require you to be hostile to religion. It requires only a willingness to look at historical evidence without assuming in advance that the spread of any particular faith was determined primarily by its spiritual qualities.

Understanding the mechanism also dissolves a confusion that generates enormous amounts of historical violence. Religious wars are almost never primarily about religion.

They are conflicts over which group will control the institutional apparatus — the schools, the courts, the tax system, the political legitimation — that determines what the next generation will believe. The specifically theological content of the dispute is real and sincerely held, but it is the flag, not the territory. The territory is always the same: who will control the machinery that manufactures conviction.

The Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), which killed perhaps eight million people in central Europe, was experienced by most participants as a war for religious truth. It was also, transparently, a war about which princes would control which territories and whether the Habsburg dynasty would achieve dominance over the fragmented German states. The religious dimension and the political dimension were not separate threads that happened to be tangled together. They were the same thread, because in a world where institutional control determines belief, controlling institutions is controlling religion, and controlling religion is controlling institutions. The contestants understood this even when they did not say it in those terms. The Peace of Westphalia that ended the war formalized the principle that had been operating all along: the ruler determines the religion of the territory.

None of this requires a conspiracy. No one needs to have planned it. The Persian nobles who supported the Zoroastrian high priest Kartir against Mani were not cynically calculating that Zoroastrianism served their class interests. They were sincere Zoroastrians whose class interests happened to align with Zoroastrian institutional dominance, as they had for generations, because the Zoroastrian system had been built to serve the Persian aristocracy and the Persian aristocracy had been built within the Zoroastrian system. The alignment was so deep that it was invisible. It felt like truth. It was truth, from the inside. It was also the product of who had won which battle several hundred years earlier.

The Persian peasant of 250 CE did not choose Zoroastrianism. His grandson's grandson did not choose Islam. The English villager of 1520 did not choose Catholicism; his great-grandchild did not choose Protestantism. The Soviet worker of 1950 did not choose Marxism-Leninism. They were all shaped by institutional environments they did not select, built by powers they did not elect, legitimated by battles they did not fight. They all experienced the result as conviction — deep, personal, genuine, and obviously true.

And they were right that their conviction was genuine. They were right that it was personal. What they could not see — what the system was specifically designed to prevent them from seeing — was that the content of that genuine personal conviction had been determined long before they were born, on a battlefield they would never visit, by people whose names they would never know.



Conclusion: What It Means to Know This

There is a version of this argument that leads to a kind of paralysis — if all belief is manufactured, if sincerity proves nothing about origins, if the most vivid spiritual experience is compatible with having been produced by institutional machinery in the service of military victors, then what can you trust? The answer is: more than before, not less.

Knowing the mechanism does not invalidate your experience of your beliefs. It does not tell you your beliefs are false. What it does is give you a tool for a question that is otherwise impossible to ask honestly: why do I have these particular beliefs, in this particular form, with this particular confidence, while people born two hundred miles in a different direction, or two centuries in a different time, have equally confident and equally sincere beliefs that are irreconcilable with mine? The answer to that question is not that you happened to find the truth and they happened not to. The answer is the mechanism described in this paper: military outcome, institutional infrastructure, generational transmission, suppression of alternatives, and the phenomenology of conviction that is the final product of all of it.

This knowledge is valuable for several reasons. It is the beginning of genuine intellectual humility — not the performed humility of acknowledging that you might be wrong, but the structural humility of understanding why the odds that any of us have reasoned our way to our deepest convictions are considerably lower than we like to think. It is the basis for understanding religious conflict without the category error of treating theological dispute as the cause of what is almost always a contest for institutional control. It is the foundation for recognizing, when you watch a new regime install itself and immediately move to capture the schools, the media, the legal system, and the ceremonies of public life, that this is not incidental to the political project — it is the

political project, the mechanism by which a military victory is converted into a durable order that the next generation will experience as natural.

Most importantly, it is an invitation to look at the people on the other side of whatever divide you inhabit — religious, national, ideological — with something other than the bafflement that attends genuine incomprehension. They are not, in most cases, stupid. They are not, in most cases, evil. They have sincere convictions that feel to them exactly as yours feel to you — obvious, natural, freely chosen, and worth defending. Those convictions were manufactured by the same mechanism that manufactured yours, operating on different raw material in a different institutional environment shaped by different military outcomes. The soldier enforcing the inquisition and the heretic being dragged before it are both products of the system. The difference between them is not virtue or intelligence. It is which side of the institutional apparatus they happened to be born on.

Understanding this does not dissolve the conflicts that arise from genuine differences in what people believe. It does not make negotiation easy or reconciliation automatic. What it does is remove the additional layer of incomprehension — the sense that the other side must be either wicked or deluded to believe what they believe — that makes conflicts harder than they need to be. They believe what they believe for the same reasons you believe what you believe. The reasons are almost never the ones either of you would name if asked.

A Note on Sources and Further Reading

The theoretical framework underlying this argument draws on several intellectual traditions. Max Weber's analysis of legitimate domination — particularly his typology of traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational authority in *Economy and Society* (1922) — provides the foundational vocabulary for understanding how power sustains itself through belief rather than coercion alone. Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, developed in the *Prison Notebooks* (written 1929–1935), describes how ruling classes sustain dominance by making their worldview the common sense of the entire society — a process this paper describes through institutional mechanism rather than class consciousness. Pierre Bourdieu's work on the reproduction of social

structures, particularly in *The Logic of Practice* (1980) and *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (1977, with Jean-Claude Passeron), provides the most rigorous account of how institutional transmission produces habituated belief that feels natural to the believer.

For the specific cases examined here: on Manichaeism and its suppression under the Abbasids, Samuel N.C. Lieu's *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China* (1985) remains the standard English-language account; Mahmood Ibrahim's 'Religious Inquisition as Social Policy: The Persecution of the Zanadiqa in the Early Abbasid Caliphate,' *Arab Studies Quarterly* 16:2 (1994) establishes the political rather than purely theological character of the inquisition. The primary source most valuable for understanding Manichaean self-presentation is the *Cologne Mani-Codex* (*Codex Manichaicus Coloniensis*, c. 400 CE), which preserves Mani's own account of his mission.

On the English Reformation as institutional reorganization rather than primarily spiritual transformation: Eamon Duffy's *The Stripping of the Altars* (1992) provides the essential account of how deep Catholic institutional life was in England before the Reformation and how thoroughly the Tudor state dismantled it; Diarmaid MacCulloch's *Reformation: Europe's House Divided 1490–1700* (2003) is the best single-volume account of the political-institutional dimensions of what is too often told as a purely theological story.

On the Sasanian religious politics surrounding Mani: Shaul Shaked's *Dualism in Transformation* (1994) and the Kartir inscriptions at Naqsh-e Rostam and Naqsh-e Rostam (third century CE, the primary source for the Zoroastrian high priest's own account of his suppression campaign) are essential. On Islam's institutional consolidation: Hugh Kennedy's *The Early Abbasid Caliphate* (1981) and *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates* (1986) provide the political history; Patricia Crone's work on the conversion economy, particularly in *Slaves on Horses* (1980), analyzes the material logic of conversion in the early Islamic period.

On secular nationalism as a belief system operating through the same mechanism: Ernest Gellner's *Nations and Nationalism* (1983) and Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983) are the foundational texts, though neither frames their argument in quite the terms used here. Robert Gellately's *Lenin, Stalin, and Hitler: The Age of Social Catastrophe* (2007) provides comparative institutional analysis of the three major

totalitarian systems as belief-transmission projects sustained by coercion. On the French republican school system as a replacement for Catholic institutional infrastructure: Eugen Weber's *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914* (1976) is the classic account.

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